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October 5, 2023 -

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3303 words.

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On why your life is your greatest creative project

Writer and Chairman of the Kickstarter Board Casey Gerald discusses the power of being yourself, finding new ways to do business, and embracing the artist's role in society.

You're committing a lot of your time, energy, and effort to Kickstarter. What is it about the company that feels worthwhile to you?

When I quit MBAs Across America, I really never planned to be involved in business again, in part because I was so wounded and so depressed. I had become convinced that if I was going to be a real writer, I had to choose. When I first started talking to Perry about it, I was very resistant because I knew I had this shame about who I had been in the past and about the ways I had made compromises to show up in spaces, in roles that required me to leave parts of myself outside. The first hurdle I had to get over to take this job, just to join the board period, was to feel that I could be involved with Kickstarter and still be myself. It sounds so basic, but that's a very rare thing, especially in the business world. So it's been very healing for me.

Beyond that, I know how important it is that we work on behalf of artists and creators at this time. We need creative work to help remind us of the beauty and the danger and the possibility of this human exercise. We need it.

Artists and creators at their best, they lift our eyes. They lift our collective consciousness to this horizon that's out there, and we need that. I also know how remarkably difficult it is to do creative work independently now. Somebody said to me, "Oh, well, you say you're for small creators, but Spike Lee had a Kickstarter." I said, "Well, did you not hear the story of what Spike had to do to get Malcolm X made?" The studio said, "Sure, you can do Malcolm X, but it's got to be an hour-and-a-half. It's got to be two hours." They criticized and attacked his creative vision unrelentingly so much so that at some point, they decided not to fund the movie anymore as it was shooting. Spike had to go and ask Oprah and Janet Jackson and Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson, "Hey, can you give us some money so we can finish this movie for Brother Malcolm?" That was crowdfunding. So Kickstarter's not about small creators versus big creators. It's about independent creativity. That part of Kickstarter's mission is not a "nice to have." It's not like "a cool hobby." That part of Kickstarter's mission, for me, is the difference between freedom and unfreedom in this world.

It's the difference between human flourishing and a great darkness falling over our species and our planet. So that's worth my time. One of the reasons I'm excited about this job is I want to see what happens when creatives and artists lead the creative industries. What happens when you bring the spirit and the mindset of a serious creative person, a serious artist into a context of a company or an organization? Things happen. Good things. I think. I hope.

Time limitations can be useful. I've had a job since I was 13, the same age I was when I started a zine, and so I'm used to moving between work and creativity. That kind of friction is inspiring, I think. How do you find balancing this new position, as Chairman of the Board of Directors at Kickstarter, with your own creative practice?

I don't believe in balance, or to the extent that I believe in it, my belief has never sufficiently turned into reality. Maybe it's because I got too much water in my chart, my Venus is in Scorpio and my Mars is

Pisces, that's a real in-the-depths, as Ginsberg says, "In the animal soup of time," kind of thing. Whatever the reason, I seem to only know how to do life all or nothing.

On one very crass human level, this role helps me stay alive as an artist. When [Kickstarter co-founder] Perry Chen asked me to join the board in 2019, I didn't even know you got paid for this kind of thing. The same week I learned, my bank account was negative. I work as a writer in a way that makes it highly unlikely I'm going to be commercially gangbusters. I only write when I have something to say, but I can't pay my rent only when I have something to say. Also, the kinds of things I write are kind of strange and my sensibility is not particularly mainstream. There's something about being bossed around and watered down and neutered that since I was a child, it's been impossible for me to go along with. I tell writers all the time, "If you want to be a free writer in this country, you better find another way outside of publishing to make a living."

My work as a writer is sometimes like being in a very tumultuous love affair. When it's going bad, it feels like the whole world is just bleak and dark and sad and empty and over. So one of the reasons it's so helpful as an artist to have something else you do well that is not an existential imperative, is that on a daily basis, I have something I can turn to that I feel competent at, that's not life or death. It helps me remember I do have some value in the world and I can have some impact.

I spent most of my early 20s planning to be President. I was very serious about it. I also felt very seriously about leadership and fixing the things that I was pissed off about. I spent all these years studying how to lead things, build things, solve problems, how to bring people together. Once I finally let go of all of those political ambitions, I had all these years of study, and I had nothing to really do with them. Leadership is as much a craft as anything else, and it's a craft I have studied for a very long time with no outlet for it.

It's been very healing to have a chance to put these things to use. It's helpful to have a release valve for my intensity. I can fight with this lover, my work, from 11:00 at night to 6:00 in the morning. I can dream about it, I can curse at it all day. I can go and weep in the park, then I know I can take a break from it and catch up with [Kickstarter CEO] Everette Taylor and be reminded, "Okay, hey, everything's all right."

It's useful being out and about in the world experiencing things outside of your art.

Right. What is the artist's job in a society? President Kennedy gave a speech at Amherst, I believe, in '63, and he talked about the role of the artist. He said, "Our politicians should know poetry and our poets should know politics." The reason the great artists are what they are, especially if you're going to be a writer, is you have to know something about the society you're operating in and that you're trying to understand and you're trying to influence, you have to be in it.

I think of that great book Too Loud a Solitude by Bohumil Hrabal, about a guy who spent 35 years compacting wastepaper. Eventually, he's made to also compact banned books, and he starts a secret operation to save the books and read the books as he saves them. Then, he hears of a new machine that will replace the human compactors, and he's faced with a big question: "Am I going to just get in the machine and go along with the books and be destroyed? Because without the books, or my work, there's no real point of being alive." That book, which is so brilliant, comes out of an intimate understanding of the politics and social reality that Hrabal was living in. I think the more stuff you do outside of your creative work, the better your creative work will be. Also, as I've said before, your life is your greatest creative project.

Many of the writers I talk to on TCI also teach. When you're giving talks, that feels like teaching. Do you view your role as that of a teacher or an educator?

I view it more so as an energy exchange. You're trying to affect people vibrationally. So I guess that is teaching, in the sense that, whatever I have that can be of use to you as you travel on the journey you've come into this lifetime to travel, I want to offer it. Whatever you have for me that the universe has conspired to bring us together for me to receive, I want to be open to it.

We're very fortunate because, great credit to Perry, we've got on this board Fred Wilson, who's one of the best venture capitalists of all time; Michael Lynton, who's like a Michael Jordan of CEOs; you got a genius technologist in Sep Kamvar, a legend in Sunny Bates, who's been on Kickstarter's board since the beginning. At TED this year Chris Anderson said, from the TED stage, "There would be no TED as we know it without Sunny." That's just one of the many things she's done. Then you have Perry, who was one of my heroes when I was working in social enterprise in business school; then Jess Search, who's one of the bravest humans I've ever known, and was such an important light in my life, especially as a queer person. Jess's death this summer still feels like a wrecking ball just came through the world, my heart. I'm so fortunate to be able to learn from the people that I work with. So that's, I think, why I hesitate to say I'm their teacher because I find myself in study mode so much.

When I interviewed the musician Justin Vernon for TCI, he talked about how people can often feel the need to endlessly scale up-companies, too, obviously. But that's not the only way to have success.

I've been talking to many of the early Kickstarter team members recently, and what's become clear is that they were counter-cultural in their souls, not just in their outfits. So what you see at the founding of this company is a group of people who, by their very nature, were living against the grain. The genesis of the thing is just a guy and a group of friends who were just trying to figure out a way to live true to

themselves, which meant living often at odds with the world around them. Kickstarter comes out of that spirit of making the rebellion sustainable.

That's how I think about it from a business standpoint. Because listen, I spent many years, as a student at Harvard Business School and after, in the social enterprise space. But the most important thing I did was drive thousands of miles across the country with my MBAs Across America friends—going to New Orleans and Detroit (right when the city went bankrupt) and rural Montana, and sending people into Appalachia. We met these small business owners, entrepreneurs, like Sarah Calhoun running a work-wear company in a town of 900 people in White Sulphur Springs, Montana, Red Ants Pants. Sebastian Jackson running a barbershop in Detroit. Burnell Cotlon starting the first grocery store in the lower ninth ward after Hurricane Katrina with his life savings from the military. These people, they were not trying to give a Harvard lecture on conscious capitalism. They were trying to make some impact in their community. They were trying to do something valuable with the life that they had been given. They were trying to have a little fun along the way. You know what I mean? It wasn't controversial at all to them that they were going to build a business that was good to and for people. They didn't want an extra gold star for that.

We've got to be right there alongside creators. We have to be there as their friends. We have to feel that their creative projects matter to us as people, not just to us as a business.

Over the years, I've spoken to so many people who discuss the challenge of getting their work made, their work heard, and getting paid for that work. Philip Glass is in his 80s and he's still talking about how hard it is to get paid as a musician. You think, "Philip Glass? Really?" It's not easy to make a living as an artist and it feels like that's a big part of why you're here, at Kickstarter, to help solve that, to allow for creative independence.

To Philip Glass's point, I just interviewed Kendrick Lamar's longtime collaborator Terrace Martin, one of the most respected musicians of his time, and even he had to fight to get paid for work that he does. Success doesn't guarantee you won't still have to fight.

It's hard on so many levels. It breaks your heart, sometimes. To bring something into the world requires, it requires, especially for a sensitive artist, it requires painful compromises.

This is why TCI is one of the most important things we've ever done and we'll ever do as a company because it's this repository of artistic comrades and witnesses who have this space to be honest about how terrifying and difficult and thrilling it is to do our work, to share the mistakes we've made and the dreams we still have and the bargains we've made and refuse to make, and the things that helped us get through it.

Then on the other side, it's this repository of nourishment for other artists. It's that thing of what Lucille Clifton said, "If all [the poem] does is say you're not alone, that's enough." If all the TCI interview does is say, you're not alone, that's enough. It's such a beautiful and powerful thing.

I want Kickstarter to achieve and stay true to its mission. I want us to think about good governance. I want us to hire great people, let them do their best work. I want all that stuff to happen. I want us to be great models of what business can be in the world, but more importantly, I want us to be there for creators as friends.

It's always made sense to me that an artist started Kickstarter. It's essential to have people within the company who make their own creative work, too. So, it feels ideal that the Chairman of the Board here has a creative practice.

As a writer, you've dealt with issues other creative people are facing, so you're better equipped to tackle those problems. If you've never had to push back against an editor or a publication, it's hard to grasp what someone else is going through. If you've never had to fight for your creative vision, it's difficult to understand what that feels like.

How do you think being an artist equips you for this position?

My grandfather was a minister and a prominent pastor for a very long time in Texas, nearly 50 years. One of the things that taught me is that no profession in and of itself is noble. The profession is only as noble as the person is. I don't think there's any redemptive value in saying you're an artist or saying you're not an artist. I think the only value is, do you live a life that is true and honest? Do you try to love people or at least be kind to them and love yourself? Do you leave the world and people better than you found it?

One of the great things that Erykah Badu taught me recently, she said she wrote a letter to the universe when she was 15 and said, "I know I'm going to make it with the help of God. Nothing can stop me but me."

I asked her, "Did you see that letter as a bargain?" She said, "No, there is no bargain unless you make a deal with the devil. That deal with the devil they talk about is, 'I will sacrifice my integrity to succeed at any cost.'" There are many artists who make that bargain, and that's why Kickstarter is about independent creativity. Independent creativity is so difficult, in part because it requires you to refuse that deal with the devil as much as possible, as often as possible, accepting that on the margins and sometimes right at the very core of it per your standards, you will have made some deals just to get your work out. So it's not enough to have the "right" job, we've got to have the right values.

That's a damn hard thing to do. Maya Angelou was right when she said, "Courage is the most important of all the virtues, because without it, you cannot practice any other virtue consistently." So at base I see my job as holding space for us to practice courage as a company, helping us hold each other to the standard we have set.

I consider it a great privilege to be able to bring all that to bear in this context to say, we're going to be pretty relentless about living up to our mission, our values and principles. Our first year of MBS Across America, we'd gone out to Boulder and we worked with this outfit called the Made Movement, these really masterful advertising folks who were trying to use their skills to support American manufacturing. In our first conversation with their co-founder, Dave Schiff, he said, "Everybody who works here has to make a material sacrifice to get in the door because there's no line item on a balance sheet for 'Give a damn', but it's the most valuable thing you've got in a business." I think that is very true, and I think it's very relevant for us at Kickstarter.

You had asked if I see myself as a teacher, maybe, but more so a leader. Many years ago, I think it was the guy who had founded the African Leadership Academy, we were at some dinner and he said, "Leadership is disrupting your own people at a speed that they can withstand." I think where many leaders go wrong is they want to disrupt and make the news to feel powerful, or clever, or worthy. That's fear. But if there's love at the heart of it, it becomes like being a parent. If you're going to be a good parent, you're going to disrupt your kid a lot, and your kid is probably going to disrupt you, too. I don't want to be paternalistic about it, but what I mean is that if you're going to be a good friend, if you're going to be a good brother, if you're going to be a good boss, if you're going to be a good employee, there's going to be friction. There's going to be disruption, there's going to be dis-ease. But all of that has to be in a container of love for it to be fruitful and not destructive, and I think that's what I try to do.

Casey Gerald Recommends:

Well Off Media's behind the scenes chronicle of Coach Prime & the Colorado Buffaloes

First Light Books in Austin, Texas

Erykah Badu & Bay Bay interview

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